

The Odd Jobs Club

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by

Megan Proehl

The Ohio State University

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Project Advisor: Professor Michelle Herman,

Department of English

I had set my alarm early that day, but Hayley was up and gone before me. That isn't uncommon; she tends to be more of the late to bed early to rise type in our apartment. She had a dental appointment down at the campus and we had already packed my car the night before so we could get an early start on the drive to Nashville. It was a new Toyota Corolla to replace the crumbling Probe I'd bought when I turned sixteen. I was excited to see what kind of gas mileage I could get and write it down in my logbook. I threw on some boxer shorts and a t-shirt, gave my short hair a disappointing once-over and splashed on blush. I wandered out to the kitchen to start stir-fry leftovers in the microwave and put some water in our miniature coffee pot to heat up.

I curled up in the big goldenrod chair in our living room to wait for the food and just looked around. I like to have these moments sometimes, just absolutely alone and quiet, and take stock. They used to happen in my bed at home before the door was opened and the quiet was disrupted, just looking at the way the light hit the dust moving slowly through the air or how everything looked manila through my purple curtains. Our little apartment is the kind of cozy you think of when you hear the word "cottage" or smell a spicy wassail. It's all hand-me-down furniture from various relatives and friends, some nice in its day, some Target-bought. But with couch and chair covers, some

cheap framed posters, homemade art, and a few house plants, the place feels like a home away from home. Hayley and I talk a lot about transitions here: from high school to college, from Chillicothe to Columbus, and from living around the corner from Rachel to a seven-hour drive to see her. I think it was that closeness that allowed our club to survive that long.

The Odd Jobs Club began in the third grade when Hayley and I decided that it would be better to be working and making money to buy Barbies than to moan about being bored. I was reading *The Baby-sitter's Club* and Hayley had a new notebook, so we used what knowledge and resources we had. We wrote down a list of clients and inked our thumbprints onto an envelope we planned to use for all the money we'd make. We weren't old enough to baby-sit so we came up with "odd jobs." We would clean houses, water plants, feed and clean up after pets, and any other job two young girls could take on. Rachel joined the club in the fourth grade, after a lengthy interview process, and, in the years to come, we had bigger jobs--upwards of \$3000 at times saved in our own bank account--and took big trips instead of buying Barbies. It all lasted until senior year.

The microwave beeped and I made my tea. The weather was great, cool in the morning but bright sunshine. It reminded me of summers back when we didn't have separate lives and big future plans. Going outside to play was on the agenda. I liked

the throwback. I brushed my teeth and checked my car bag for the millionth time to make sure I had everything I needed, then took one last look around and it was time to pick Hayley up.

Driving away, just the two of us, felt something like *running* away. We were on our own time, no freaking out about getting on the road just a little later than planned. We could stop anywhere we wanted. Here we were, just two twenty-somethings driving from Ohio to Tennessee. It seemed funny to us how, at this age, our moms were married and had their own family, but we still felt like children. The years you spend in college are just an extension of dependency: you're on your own, but not really. You pay for things, but not really. You think you know everything, but, sadly, not really. So when Rachel moved to Tennessee, went to massage school, graduated after a little over a year, and was living on her own with a horse, it was very different from the life Hayley and I were living. And I'd be lying if I didn't say it scared us a little.

I didn't want to feel like a child, having always been the "mature" one, and I don't think Hayley wanted to meet a different Rachel than the one from back home. In the car, we talked about how we had changed; I had trouble finding any major differences in myself.

Hayley had the printed map on her lap and I cranked up the oldies on the radio. We were heading south on 71 with nothing

around us but soybean fields and Jesus billboards. The next turn we had to make wasn't until Cincinnati, after the "Welcome to Ohio" bridge.

"What do you think her apartment is like?" Hayley leaned the seat back and looked out the window. Rachel had just moved into her fourth apartment in two years and this time she had no roommates and was in a good part of town, just off Vanderbilt's campus.

"I don't know. I bet it's cute. And I think she'll really like living by herself." Saying that, I wondered silently how much had really changed. I couldn't imagine living completely on my own yet; Hayley and I still kind of watched out for each other and our parents were only an hour away.

"I think so too." Hayley sighed and leaned her head back into the headrest. We fell into a thoughtful silence. After long times apart, it gets that way, but once you're all together, everything locks into its certain places again.

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My first memory of the three of us isn't even a real memory. It's a 1987 photograph in my mom's scrapbook of six parents standing at the altar of a church with four children in their arms. My twin brother and I, Hayley, and Rachel were

being dedicated by the pastor. I was the oldest of us girls, followed by Hayley and Rachel, exactly six months younger. It must have been fate that our church was getting rid of the wavy wall that had made our sanctuary famous ("the church so friendly, it waves back at you") and so had to delay Eric's and my dedication to the next scheduled one. Looking at the picture, with our parents standing by each other and looking hopefully at the pastor with their bundles of lace and tiny dress shoes, it makes me wonder if there was any way the Odd Jobs Club could have not existed in some separate universe. It was *destiny*, here.

I was the twin who was supposed to be a boy, identical to my two-minutes-older brother. When the doctor, up to his elbow, pulled me into the world, a girl, my parents were, at the least, surprised. I couldn't let them down. I was surrounded, swarmed, by family. I grew up within ten minutes of both sets of grandparents, three great-grandparents, a slew of great aunts and uncles, almost ten aunts and uncles, and cousins galore. And we saw them all the time. Birthdays for Eric and me were packed to the brim with relatives and friends; our annual New Years' Eve party was crowded with the old and the new and we even got together every Sunday for dinner after church. I grew up knowing who I was and exactly where I came from.

Hayley was the baby with an older brother and sister. She lived five short blocks away when we were little and moved just around the corner in the latter half of elementary school. She loved to be outside, helping her mom, Teresa, in the fairy garden they planted. They picnicked with dolls in the front yard under a heavy white blanket draped over the climbing tree as a tent. Her house on Beechwood was comfortable, one of those houses you read about in old books where everything always smelled the same way and change came slowly. Hayley played football with the boys on the street, half-tomboy half-princess. We both made the puddles in the gutter into miniature oceans for our dolls.

Rachel walked when she was seven months old and hasn't slowed down since. She has an older brother, Nathan, who was and is surrounded by a heavenly glow, and Rachel was going to show the world what she had in *her*. She was always fishing, catching bugs and frogs, and dreaming about horseback riding. Rachel was her daddy's girl, playing with ham radios, hiking the next big hill at Scioto Trails, and riding in big Dodge trucks. Going to her house was always an adventure, whether it was just going through old stuff in her garage attic, watching a movie in her basement, or digging for gold in the driveway. We also did a lot of talking lying in her bed. She had a passion for life

that has pushed me to live just a little further on the edge, but not too far.

Hayley and Rachel were friends first. They were babies with play dates and entire afternoons to fritter away. There's a photograph of them sitting together tucked into a wooden rocking chair. They took this same picture every few years until their hips were wider and couldn't lock together into the chair. In the last photo, Hayley is sitting slightly on top of Rachel with a gummy grin, cheeks puffing, and Rachel is peeking out from behind her blonde locks. They're inseparable.

I didn't really know them until early elementary school. I was the quiet and awkward child, nudging my way in to slumber parties and outside recess games. I learned how to be a friend with these girls.

Another photograph from those early years shows Hayley and me sitting on top of her patio table in the backyard. It's obviously late fall, cold enough for winter coats but sunny enough to play outside. I have some ugly earmuffs on and my hair is standing on end like a lion's mane around them. A goofy grin and awkward hands finish the look. Hayley has freckles all across her nose and her winter coat is unzipped to a gymnastics t-shirt. We've got our arms around each other and we look like we would topple off the table backward if a wind picked up.



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I missed Rachel's apartment three times, first misreading the apartment number on her directions, second misreading the numbers on the apartments, and third stalling my car in front of the building. Hayley and I were giggling by that time, all caught on the video camera I had brought along for the trip. We parked next to a big truck on one side and a gaggle of pine trees, peering over the road, on the other. Hayley had a hard time getting out, which made us laugh even more and then there was the heat. It was thick as a sweater, made it hard to breathe. I popped the trunk and we pulled our bags out and waddled our way to the door.

"And you're sure it's apartment C?" I asked, as we lugged our stuff up the stairs.

"That's what she told us." Hayley checked the directions once again. The apartment was a narrow brick building with a common door and four apartments inside, two on the bottom and two on top. It felt a little looser than our apartment in Columbus with its metal railings and Berber carpet. This one had wood floors and rugs thrown haphazardly in the walkways. There was an old chair at the top of the stairs beneath two sagging windows flanked by Rachel's apartment and her neighbor's.

"Okay, so the key is supposed to be outside her door," I said, mainly to myself. We dropped our bags and began the search. It wasn't fruitful.

"I'm going to kill her," Hayley said. Rachel had called us during the drive because she had forgotten a massage she was scheduled to give at the same time we were getting there. She promised us she would leave the key so we could let ourselves in. After checking under the door, under the chair, under the cushions, and around the perimeter of the room, we both fell into the overstuffed chair.

"What are we going to do?" I had always been the worrier of the three of us. And sitting there in that old chair, I was starting to notice the things that felt unfamiliar, the dusty smell of the cushions, the small angry bark of a little dog in the next apartment, and still that nagging heat. And now, that Rachel had maybe forgotten us. It was all too symbolic for me. Hayley's always been good at snapping me out of it, though.

"We have to think like Rachel. Where would she think to put the key where we would find it?" We sat there surrounded by our luggage and tried to think like Rachel. It made me laugh to myself. Hayley turned and started looking around the windows. The paint was chipping all around the sills and the glass was wavy. Without even a word, we had the same idea. I kneeled on the chair and pulled the window open a little. Hayley reached

into the space between the screen and the pane and produced the key. We found that funny, too, probably because it was just so hot and we were sick of being vagabonds. The heavy door unlocked on the fourth try and we dragged our stuff into a sparse living room with a low-slung couch and a string of Chinese lantern lights on the floor behind the TV. There were framed pictures and canvases leaning against walls as if waiting to be hung up. It felt like we had work to do.

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Our first job ever occurred the night of the Odd Jobs Club inception. We were hired on the spot by my gracious mother after a presentation at the kitchen counter before dinner. She chopped celery for the clam chowder while we rattled off our many talents and our dreams of making it big. My mom humored us, nodding and mmmhmmmming at all the right places, probably smiling at our decisiveness when we looked away. When we proposed she be our first client, she paused the chopping for a moment.

"But I've already done all the Wednesday chores, Megan. The dusting and vacuuming are done, the toilets are clean, even the dishwasher's unloaded."

"Anything, Mom. We'll do anything." Hayley and I looked at her with pleading in our eyes.

"OK, you can clean up the Gus poop." Gus was our big black Lab. I looked over to Hayley to confirm our first job. We nodded and rushed out the sliding screen door. After an entire fifteen minutes of scooping, we came back in to receive our payment. Twenty-five cents. We placed the quarter inside our ceremoniously decorated envelope.

"We did it." Hayley beamed as if we had just won the lottery.

"This won't be like our other clubs. We're going to keep doing jobs." I looked down at our envelope. "We need to write everything down."

"We need officers," Hayley said. "We can be co-presidents."

"I could be the secretary and you could be the treasurer," I said. As my first secretarial duty, I decided we needed to keep records.

I pulled out the new notebook and wrote down my mom's full name, our phone number, address, and the number one. I handed the book to Hayley and she flipped to the middle and made columns. She wrote my mom's name, "dog poop", the date, and twenty-five cents. We then decorated the cover because that made it official.

Within the next week, we completed more jobs. We dusted, we watered plants, and we washed windows. We even put signs up at church, with our phone number and a photo, and at the local Baskin Robbins, which I'm sure one of our moms took down as soon as we left from hanging it up. Just the two of us, we made somewhere around thirty dollars in three months, which was big money at that age. We were on a mission.

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We dumped our stuff in the living room and walked into the next small room adjoined to the kitchen. Hardwood floors stretched between the walls and Rachel's touches were everywhere. It almost confused me, seeing all these things that seemed *completely* her, but so far away from Chillicothe. There were pictures of horses, the Shel Silverstein book on the shelf, the collection of coffee mugs drying on the counter, and that blue rug from her room makeover in Chillicothe. It took me back to that night in her room, painting my favorite Dorothy Parker poem around her ceiling. The poem is still there, but her parents now live in that room; they use their old room as a library. So Rachel's stuff had all come to Nashville and this was her home now. I think it was hard for Hayley and me to understand at that point because although we lived in an

apartment in Columbus most of the time, when we went home, we still had our rooms that had hardly changed since we'd left. We were torn still. This room had a hammock stretched from the windows on one side of the corner to a stud in the wall on the other. A record player sat in the other corner with another bookshelf. The kitchen was connected to that living room with the oldest half-working stove I had ever seen. The place seemed random but cozy. The trees were mature outside. We got into the fridge to get something to drink.

"She only has soymilk!" I felt a vague sense of outrage. Soymilk seemed foreign and somehow against the things I'd been taught.

"Let's try it," Hayley said. We each poured a small glass, looked at each other, and took a sip.

"Ewwww!" It was unanimous. It wouldn't be a year later when soymilk became a staple in our fridge too, mixed with tea, coffee, whatever. Water would have to be our drink of choice then. We took our glasses out to the couch and papasan chair and found Wheel of Fortune on the TV. Soon we were down to our T-shirts and underwear; we were dripping in the heat. Getting hungry, we looked through the take-out menus hanging off Rach's fridge, getting excited about sushi or Caribbean food for tonight.

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Growing up, our lives normally centered on some sort of food. Baptist churches are known for their potluck dinners. Our families had get-togethers with pastas and roasted meats, potatoes, rolls. Even school lunches were an event; I packed lots of "exotic" leftovers like pasta carbonara, Hayley got Little Charlies pizzas oozing with marinara, and Rachel was always munching on some sort of candy or bags of croutons. We would fix each other breakfast when we held sleepovers, arguing whether it should be called French toast or eggy bread (I say French toast), baking cookies around Christmas, and making communion bread to snack on during movie sessions. Sometimes girls have a fickle relationship with food, though. It's our comfort when we've had a bad day and our pride when we've cooked something glorious, but it can become a secret enemy in the time it takes to look in a mirror. I remember when we became uncentered; spiraling away from the foods we grew up with and toward some fear of those same foods.

The Odd Jobs Club became a back burner item at the end of middle school. We were busy and didn't have the regular meetings and jobs we had kept for the past five years. I remember, the summer before high school, we took our first beach trip, Panama City Beach, with the Odd Jobs Club money we had

saved for years. We had just arrived at the condo; we threw our suits on and ran down to the beach. Wading into the water, we were kind of quiet. We posed for a photo for Hayley's mom, arms around each other, standing waist-deep in the water. We're smiling, Hayley holding both of us around the middle and Rachel and I leaning slightly back. Taking that picture was a turning point for me. I remember clearly how sad I felt for an instant, that I did not know these girls as well as I should have right then. We all had separate groups we were running with and had forgotten to catch up. That trip brought us back together for a week to get to know each other again the way we had before. To remember that we all liked microwaved cookie dough, that Rachel would try such a thing as frog legs in a restaurant and that I was afraid of absolutely everything. We swam with dolphins, we went to SeaWorld, we visited Downtown Disney (my first and only time to go to anything Disney-related), and we lay on the beach for a week. All on our own money.

After that trip came high school. We had choices about where to spend our time now. I chose swimming and with it came nightly practices and weekend meets. I also lifeguarded a lot, making my own money to save up for that Probe. I felt secure: I was talented at my sport, doing well in school, had been dating a guy for a while, and was happy. Hayley chose volleyball; she had practice every afternoon and the girls were really close on



the team. She enjoyed it and excelled at it but tryouts were tough. She also dated an older guy and hung out with him and his friends on the weekends. Rachel chose youth group and other church activities and went on lots of trips and met with several different groups during the week. She always had funny stories about fellow members and seemed like she was really fitting in with all the guys and girls. We still talked, we still got together to have slumber parties on the weekends. We made time for each other again, I thought.

There were things that were going on beneath the surface that I never even picked up on until it was almost too late. I remember it all as mere scenes, and the time in between seems watery and unfocused. Perhaps it's because I still don't want to remember most of it. But, more than likely, it was because I was just too busy to notice what was happening to my two best friends as I rushed on by. It began as silent as a late summer sky in Kingston and ended with two tearful hugs; but knowledge that nothing would ever be quite the same again loomed close.

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The church basement smelled faintly of goldfish crackers and old Bibles. The short Berber of the two-year-old room was rough on the feet and the tiled hallway cold. It was almost summer, wedding season, and a large leftover white sheet cake sat in the old kitchen, all frilly icing and bubble letters. We

were hired to baby-sit Sunday evenings but there were hardly ever any kids. Light cast sidelong shadows through the small high windows. Hayley lay sprawled on the floor, waiting for a massage, with a diet bar close to her slender fingers.

"I wish we could go to the beach again," she said.

"We will. That's why we're baby-sitting," I said. I sat beside her and began dipping my fingers into her skinny shoulders. Her sinew stretched over bones.

"I mean right now, though," she said. Hayley stretched, her loose shirt brushing the carpet, and turned over to face me. The light changed and I looked away from her collarbones to the play wooden kitchen that looked familiar. It made me want to go back just a few months to try something, anything, to prevent this obsession with weight.

"Well, we need to save up some more money. Maybe in August," I said. Somehow talking about the beach seemed safer than talking about what was really on my mind. Hayley pushed herself up off the floor and turned up the volume on the sanctuary speaker. Pastor Steve's voice came through saying the second prayer. "Service isn't even half over. Let's go down to the fellowship hall." We went barefoot down to the kitchen and sat at the small table next to the cake. Hayley had brought the bar with her and placed it on the table between us.

"You know, these are really good actually," she said. I picked it up carefully, looked at all the percentages on the label, and put it back down.

"Did you have dinner tonight?" I asked quietly.

"I'll have it when I go home." Hayley looked away. I started swirling my finger around the icing at the edges of the cake.

"Well, I'm starving," I said. I sounded like I was trying to convince someone of something.

"I could give you some of my bar," Hayley offered.

"No, thanks. Maybe I'll steal some of this cake." I scraped up a large swipe of piped icing from the border, toying with it between my thumb and forefinger before licking it. The icing was a bit grainy. I went back for more.

"You know, I'm pretty nervous about my thing tomorrow."

"I know." I held my freshly iced finger up to Hayley's mouth. She hesitated, as if it might be a chance to prove her decision to get better, but shook her head. I put the finger back in my own mouth.

"It's not that I don't want to change. I just don't know if I can."

"You can. Then after you have your meeting, we can go swimming at Grandma's. Maybe you won't even have to go back

again," I said. I felt so young to be talking about something like this.

"Maybe," she said. We sat for awhile staring at the cake and the diet bar. I crossed my legs, and then uncrossed them.

"You'll be fine. We'll go to the beach soon too." I could hear church letting out and we walked back down to the room together to get our shoes and head out.

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Two years later, our Christian coffee shop, the Fish, was dimly lit and rock music blared out the open door into the old Chillicothe downtown. There were some VA patients outside and I had just started dating a new guy named Brendan. He was sitting in the coffee shop and Rachel and I walked around a downtown block in the dark I don't know how many times, both wrapped in blankets from the shop.

"I think he's different, Rach. I really do," I said.

"You know he is. He's good to you Megan," she said.

"I've just felt so alone this summer and I hope I'm not doing this for the wrong reasons. I still think about Holden sometimes even though I would never go back to him," I said, trailing off.

"Well, good," Rachel said. She was being a little shorter than she usually was. But I kept on.

"He gets along so well with my family and takes the time to hang out with Eric and my Dad. And, I don't know, there's just something- he actually smiles. Really smiles," I said.

"Yeah, he's a happy guy," Rachel said. We stopped in front of the shop and sat down on the step. We watched a few cars go by. "Meg, I've got to tell you something."

I felt my stomach lurch. I didn't want to hear anything if it followed that statement in that tone.

"Meg?" she looked at me.

"What?"

"Well, it's kind of hard but it's been going on for awhile. And I need to tell you. I've had a problem for about two years."

"What kind of problem?" I was racking my brain.

"I'm bulimic."

It took me another minute to find it. What does bulimia mean? Who is the girl telling me this? "What do you mean?"

"I've been throwing up after I eat for about two years now. Remember Nathan's graduation party? I started then. It just made me feel better and kind of became a habit. And Ryan was talking to me the other night and he said he knew it was going on and convinced me to get help." I didn't know how to move in that instant. A guy she had been seeing for two months had seen it when her best friend for years hadn't even noticed.

"That can't be true Rachel, that can't be true," I said into her shoulder. My eyes started dripping. "You're the strong one."

"Megan, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said over and over. I turned my head into her neck and breathed deeply. I didn't know what to say to her, apologizing to me. I tried to apologize to her, two years late, tried to offer some comfort when she was comforting me. We stood like that for a long time until Bev came out to have Rachel start work again. It was like a bad recurring dream, first Hayley and now Rach. And I hadn't done anything to help. Brendan came out and opened the door for me and started the car. He drove me around and listened until I could stop crying. That next day, Hayley set Rach up with an appointment with Dr. Allen, stepping in when none of the rest of us knew what to think or do.

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I never would have guessed that both my best friends would struggle with eating disorders. I also always thought I was the go-to person when anyone needed help or advice. To make some sense of the whole thing, to try and grapple with failing to recognize the signs and act when I was desperately needed, and to know that my two best friends didn't reach out to me, it still hurts. There's that sharp understanding between the three of us even now; I'm not the deeply caring person I thought I

was, Rachel can't always play the strong and independent type, and Hayley does not have everything perfect. But we go on.

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Hayley stretched out in the papasan chair and I lounged on the couch. After about twenty minutes, we saw Rachel pull up outside the window and I got my video camera out and focused it on the door. She opened it a crack and peeked through with a big grin across her face, "Heyyyy guyssssss."

We all hugged and Hayley commented on how nice the apartment was and I commented on how hot we were. Then she sat on the couch at my feet. She wore a flowing skirt and a white blouse.

"So, guys, what do you want to do?" she asked. She toyed with her key ring and plopped her boots on the coffee table.

"I don't know," I said. I looked at Hayley. "We're pretty hungry."

"OK, we could grab some food. What do you feel like?"

"Maybe some sushi?" Hayley suggested. She turned off Wheel of Fortune.

"Yeah, that sounds good. How was your drive down?" Rachel asked.

"It was fine. No traffic, really. We had a hard time finding your key, though," I said, poking her in the ribs with my foot.

"Sorry, I thought you guys would find it easy," she said. She giggled.

"We did, finally. Alright, well, let's go get ready to eat, then," Hayley hoisted herself out of the chair and went down the hallway.

"So how've you been, Rach?" I rolled over on her couch to stretch my back.

"I've been good, you know. Staying busy." She smiled at me. I still knew that smile.

"Good. I worry about you, you know."

"Megan, you worry about everything."

"Someone has to, right?"

"I guess. But I'm fine." Rachel looked over at me.

"Are you going to church?"

"Not right now." I nodded. She looked away.

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When Rachel and I became friends, it was like finding a sister. Late elementary school, going into middle school, when everyone else seemed to be changing and finding new friends,



Rachel and I seemed to be staying the same. We went to church youth group a lot and took walks, talking for hours. But, just like sisters, as much as we were alike, we were also complete opposites. She wanted to go out and do everything all the time and I was content to just make some brownies, sit at home, and watch an old movie.

It seemed like sometimes she was the only one who got me then. She listened patiently as I went through boy after boy, not serious relationships but obsessions, and I don't even remember her complaining that she was always the listener. I remember asking for a lot of advice and bestowing a lot of advice, but never *really* listening. I still struggle with that.

We used to just lie on my bed and look up at the glow-in-the-dark stars. "Where do you think we'll be in ten years?" Rachel asked.

"I don't know. Probably college. Maybe out of state," I said. I thought about the college campuses I had seen on TV and the Ohio State football game Dad had taken me to.

"Yeah. Probably college. We'll be twenty-two."

"What do you want to do, Rach?" I curled up on my side. Rachel didn't answer right away.

"Maybe be a veterinarian. I want to work with horses," she said.

"That takes a lot of school, you know," I said. "And it's hard to get into and have you ever really worked with horses?" I, of course, had taken about ten riding lessons when I was younger and played with my aunt's horses, so I was the knowledgeable expert in the room.

"I know." Rachel closed her eyes and sighed.

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"How was the massage you gave today?" I asked as we left Rachel's apartment.

"It was fine. She's kind of a regular of mine now, older," Rachel said. "She's really sweet." We walked through the elementary playground down the street. We walked slowly, three across, talking. The heat was dying down a bit and the sky looked like summer break back in Chillicothe. "I want to show you these shops first; I think you'll really like them." We walked down a street with low hanging trees and big porches. It made me giddy: Rachel had found a place that feels like a home. I closed my eyes and could imagine myself living there in that moment.

The shops were small, with narrow aisles and soft music. Deep jewel toned scarves hung from shelves and rattan furniture held handmade sundresses and large silver necklaces and rings.

I tried on a big black floppy hat while Hayley pawed through the decorative pins and large sunglasses. Rachel found the incense by the counter and busied herself sniffing every type. We spent a long time wandering through the shops, buying nothing and laughing at everything. It was as if the seven hour difference between Ohio and here, and the two years we spent apart, no longer existed.

We walked down the street to Rachel's favorite sushi restaurant. We sat on the outside patio at a small table surrounded by students and other young people, drinking cocktails and eating sushi rolls and noodles. It was getting dark out; small Christmas lights dotted the lattice ceiling and candles lit the tables. We ate our fill of cheap sushi and pot stickers.

"What do you want to do tonight?" Rachel asked. I got that familiar tightening in my stomach. Hayley and Rachel enjoy going out, but I was still more of a stay-at-home girl.

"I'm kind of tired. Could we just hang out at your apartment tonight?" I asked. Hayley nodded.

"Yeah, we could get a movie or something," Rachel offered. They were always bailing me out. I sighed; relieved we could just sit and talk tonight.

We walked back toward Rachel's apartment, stopping to swing at the playground when she talked us into it. I sat on the

slide and took pictures of Rachel pretending to surf on the glider and Hayley reaching to touch her feet to the sky. The photos prove I wasn't worried about anything, time or money; it was just this moment and the warm darkness, and the silliness of three grown women climbing on the equipment and just being together. I've learned, through other moments like this playground escapade, to not take them for granted. These are the times when I actually grow.

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I watched Hayley and Rachel's heads bob up and down in the water back at the Camp Kirkwood creek while I sat on a fallen log watching. We went to the camp four years straight starting the summer after third grade. The boys had dirt floors and the girls had nice cabins and we sang songs every evening and had the best church camp food ever thought possible. I had allowed them to drag me back to the creek. We weren't supposed to go this year because the boys had pit fights with the crawdads last year. But of course we had to; it was Odd Jobs Club tradition.

They remembered the trail that took us back to the water, just past the pool where everyone was playing. "Guys, are you sure we can make it back in half an hour?" I said and adjusted my straps.

"Yes, Megan, sheesh," Rachel said. "We'll be *fine*. You don't have to go if you don't want to." But if I didn't go every time I didn't want to, I never would have done anything.

"I'm coming. I just want to make sure we're back by flat-on-bunk time."

"You'll have fun. We're just going to swim around a bit," Hayley said. We walked through the last bit of trees into an opening at the widest part of the creek complete with a fallen tree and hanging vines. It was gorgeous.

Hayley and Rachel ran splashing into the water and I took a seat on the log, holding all our towels, dipping my toes in the cold. They laughed and splashed me, egging me to get in, but I held firm. Then Hayley screamed and jumped on top of Rachel. "Leaches! There are leaches in this creek," she said. Rachel's legs gave way and down they went, Hayley wrapping her legs around Rachel's head and Rachel gurgling the water just below the surface.

"Guys, c'mon guys. Guys, it's fine. There aren't any leaches," I said, trying to get them to stop. They made me nervous even as a fourth grader.

"But there's leaches and I felt them," Hayley screeched. Rachel shoved Hayley off and scampered up the bank, heaving.

"They won't hurt you, Hayley," Rachel said, perturbed. I tried to hand Rachel her towel but she stomped back into the

water. "See? It's fine." She sat down and stroked her hand through the silt on the bottom. Hayley laughed and came and got her towel. We sat like that for awhile until Rachel felt she had proved her point. Walking in our cabin door just in time for flat-on-bunk, I sighed and smiled, we weren't late, but it was close enough. We changed out of the muddy suits and into PJs and lay down in our respective beds, listening to the fan and whispering back and forth.

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We got a movie after leaving the playground and put on our PJs. Hayley and Rachel had mismatched glasses of Riesling and I stuck with water. We talked; I don't even remember now what movie we watched. The night stretched long until we all fell asleep to the DVD menu replaying its song over and over. I got up eventually and turned off the TV, to save Rachel on the electric bill. We slept splayed on the couch together, like a couple of dolls thrown into place. Sometime during the night, Rachel and Hayley got up and went to her bed. I didn't even stir.

We woke up rather late, that is, according to Hayley time. Rachel and I are not morning people, and after staying up watching the movie and the drive the day before, I needed that

morning's sleep. We stirred to steady heat, pulsing through the doorframe, radiating off the windows. Taking a hot shower was enough to sink your chest. It was too late for breakfast, after 11, so we thought about lunch. Who knew Nashville was the only place in the world with an actual size replica of the Parthenon? It had been our planned location for that morning, according to Rach.

We got ready and piled into her car. She promised us a cute little sandwich place not too far away. I really liked looking out the window at the sleepy Nashville Saturday. The sandwich place was at the edge of the park in a small strip mall.

"They have sun-dried tomatoes to put on sandwiches," I said, to no one in particular. Rachel smiled and we all checked out. We got a blanket out of her trunk and plopped down on the grass next to the Parthenon. It was perfect: a cool sandwich with lemonade, the hot sun, and people milling around with dogs and kites. A man with dreads stood yelling obscenities from the monument.

"Do you come here a lot?" I asked.

"Yeah, I like it. My friends and I come and read or play Frisbee," Rachel said. I smiled and took a big bite out of my sandwich. Tomato oozed out the side and landed on my shirt. Rachel helped wipe it away.

"Oh, good." I was glad that Rachel had made new friends and that they went to parks and played Frisbee. I took a few photos of a big tree, a small café, and our three faces crammed into an arm's length frame in front of the monument. Our eyes look a little sleepy but our smiles are big. Eating the rest of my sandwich, we talked about the day's plans, horseback riding at the barn where Rachel works and boards her horse. We would then go to a nice dinner and out downtown.

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The Beams went out on big dates, like concerts in Columbus and out to eat in Lancaster, on which we didn't remember our parents ever going. We baby-sat for them a lot in high school. I think we learned a lot about ourselves and each other on those jobs. Rachel has seemed to draw her own conclusions: she started to think she didn't want the family, nice house, and cul-de-sac future. I don't think she'd admit it now, but I suppose the Beams had a certain influence on her decision to get away. She didn't want to live like that. They used to attend our church back before we had a big falling-out over building a new life center. The life center was to have an amazing gym and a brand new, state-of-the-art youth room; both could draw in the community, young and old (but mainly young). I would have



imagined Amy Beam supporting it; she was always "drawing people into the fold" and other such activities. But I guess I was too young to understand mortgages and not enough tithe money coming in to run our current building, let alone construct a new one. So a lot of young families left; I noticed most because the Young Adult Ministries, or YAM, Jam was discontinued during the hot summer down the street from the Indian festival, Feast of the Flowering Moon, on the church blacktop. I always liked it because there was loud music, with my uncle playing the drums in the church band, and lots of cheeseburgers and yellow potato salad, and sometimes we were allowed to walk down to the Feast without accompaniment.

Amy was a dynamic mom: she was one of those people that had so much energy, it could make you sleepy. I remember listening to some of her plans for our evenings, and my eyes would begin getting heavy. She needed all the energy she could find, though; she had five kids, three boys and two girls, the middle boy, Alex, with Down's syndrome and leukemia in remission. The last two, Ivy and baby Isaac were less than a year apart. Dr. Beam was our parents' physician and had a soft smile and Southern drawl.

I loved driving Hayley and Rachel out to their house. On Friday night, we had the windows down, Hayley crammed into the backseat, the moon roof open, and country music dancing from the

speakers. The paper plant smelled like rotten eggs, probably because it was a hot early June, and Bridge Street was backed up, but we were going to make big bucks tonight.

Pulling up into the curving driveway, we were greeted by Amy waving wildly on her wraparound porch. We loved the Beams' house because everything was oversized. The ceilings sloped upward, the stove had five burners, and a pool and trampoline resided out back. Even the view seemed large, an expanse of field in back and a new cul-de-sac with matching doctor's houses framing it. The basement was homeschool for everyone and each child had their own room upstairs. At the end of the night, Hayley, Rachel, and I would curl up on their king-size sleigh-bed, Tempurpedic and all.

Little Ivy and Ike were sitting at the kitchen counter sharing a bowl of macaroni. Alex had the door to the toy room shut, blaring The Wiggles with his face two inches from the screen. Lindsey was probably in her room somewhere and Wes was playing basketball by himself in the basement. Amy rushed us in, Wayne was finishing dressing, she explained, and then they'd be out of our hair. We sat on the couch in the lavender living room, accustoming ourselves to the noise, preparing to be parents for the evening. Deep breaths, we all thought, tonight will be fun. Amy sat on the couch opposite us while putting on her earrings.

"So the refrigerator is open game, the kids have had a late lunch, they can snack. But if you want to fix something you can. If you do fix something, Alex can have the peas, chicken nuggets, and macaroni. The kids can have nuggets or sandwiches. There's ice cream in the freezer." We all sat staring at her, smiling a bit tiredly already. Wayne walked out of their room.

"Oh, hi girls. How are y'all?" A chorus of good's, and Amy was off again.

"So it's pretty hot outside, if you've brought your suits, you could take a dip in the pool. The kids would like that. And Megan, you can be the lifeguard." Nods all around. "There's food in the slow-cooker. We're going to a concert in Columbus with dinner beforehand. Our cell phones will be on just in case. Probably be back around 11 or so." More nods. Ivy came wandering in and sat between Rachel and I on the couch.

"What time should we have them in bed?" Hayley asked.

"Oh, you know, the usual. It's Friday night, so they don't have to go too early. Little kids probably by 9 and big kids by 10:30 or so. How have you girls been?" She was speaking so quickly that it took a second to realize she asked us a question.

"We've been good," Rachel said.

"Good. Alright, well I guess I'll finish getting ready and then we can be off." She whooshed back into her bedroom and the door shut.

Ivy looked up at me and smiled bashfully. "What are we going to do tonight, Ivy?"

"I dunno," she said. I smiled.

After Wayne and Amy left, we fell into our routine. Lindsey stayed in her room, I stayed close to Alex, Hayley played with Wes, and Rachel took the two little ones. We were outside with bathing suits on before ten minutes had gone by. Alex was on the trampoline and the rest of the kids were in the pool. I was going between the two, trying to be the lifeguard and Alex's jumping buddy. I was watching Hayley dunk a basket, splashing Wes, when I realized that Alex wasn't on the trampoline anymore.

"Hayley, where's Alex?" I panicked.

"I don't know, wasn't he just on the trampoline?"

"He's not there," I said. I started yelling his name and looking around the yard. I noticed the front gate was open and ran to it.

Peering out at the driveway, I saw Alex, starfish-shaped, glued to the hood of my hot black car. I ran to him.

"Alex, you need to get off my car now."

"No!"

"Alex, I need you to get off the car. It's hot and you'll scratch it."

"No!" I walked back and forth for a moment thinking, and then walked up behind him. I placed my hands on his back and he jerked away.

"Alex, please. I need you to get off the car." He didn't respond. I put my hands under his armpits and started to lift. He squirmed and grunted loudly. I pulled harder. He swung around and latched his mouth onto my hand. I screamed.

"Alex! What are you doing?" He dropped to the ground and started to cry. I looked at my hand; there were two deep indentations from his teeth. Hayley and Rachel, hearing my scream, came running around the yard. Alex ran into the house.

"He *bit* me!" We all stood there a minute. They checked my hand. Then we started laughing uncontrollably.

Later, we crowded into the kitchen to find dinner for some tired kids. We picked at the roast in the crockpot while the kids, turning their nose up at it, ate chicken fingers and peas. The kitchen window and door were open because I had tried to cook the peas in a metal pot in the microwave. The breeze was nice but the stench remained.

Alex was allowed to take a bath around 7:30. He loved water and would fill the tub to the brim then swirl around, splashing and blowing bubbles. I went in at 8 and let the water out; he quietly got into his pajamas as if he felt bad about earlier. We went upstairs.

Rachel was kneeling beside Ivy's bed, listening to a story tape. Hayley was sitting in the second bedroom with Ike and Wes. We went into Alex's room, bare with a wood floor and a bed with just a sheet. He lay down and I tucked the sheet tight around his legs and shoulders. I kneeled down beside his bed and he looked over at me squinting.

"Do you want to say your prayers, Alex?"

"Yes." He started mumbling off his prayers starting with Jesus, including Mommy and Daddy, and trailing off. He smiled and I patted his back. I walked out and locked the door behind me. Hayley, Rachel, and I went into Wayne and Amy's bedroom and fell asleep after giving massages. We were always exhausted coming home. Thinking back, I can see clearly now that I wanted a steady and predictable life. Hayley was somewhere in between. Rach wanted anything but.

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Rachel was going to give us the grand tour of Nashville so she started around the park. She showed us where her new friends work, she showed us the massage parlor she'd just joined, and she showed us several spots she liked to go to have a bite to eat or a cup of coffee. We then got on the highway.

"I'm going to show you where I used to live. Before this apartment." We knew she'd been living with some friends in a house in East Nashville; not the best of areas, she'd said. Rachel was always a funny sort with her judgments or depictions of things. She's the girl who goes jogging at night in downtown Nashville amidst the honky-tonks and jazz bars. So when she says the area isn't the best, I begin to wonder just how rough it really was.

We pulled up to a small house with a ratted up yard and neighbors close enough to spit at. She tried to call her old roommate, but to no avail. We parked; and feeling like we were playing some game, we sneaked around through the open gate and tried the basement door. It was open and Rachel picked up a cat off the couch.

"This is Mama Cat," she said. We pet her and looked around. It's dark and a bit damp. And dirty. Needed a good scrubbing and maybe a flatbed truck to get it off this street. I couldn't believe Rachel had ever lived here and was glad we weren't staying.

"I'm glad you moved, Rach," Hayley said. I agreed. I had no desire to clean on this trip.

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The majority of our money in the Odd Jobs Club was made not by baby-sitting or house-sitting. It was the regular cleaning jobs we had, weekly or sometimes monthly, with relatives and women from church. We were masters with the dusting rag, the sponge, and the vacuum, taught right by our moms at our own houses.

We had two jobs through high school that were on our assignment books every week. The Meltons and Becky's. Reverend Bob Melton was a pastor at our church and Becky was his daughter. The Meltons had a big house on one of the hills in town, their hallway was covered in framed photos of their kids and grandkids and others (I knew those faces well from dusting). Becky lived on Vine Street in a little house with her son, Nathaniel, who was a few years older than us.

We had a routine at both places: Hayley did the bathrooms and Rachel and I dusted and vacuumed. We were quiet most of the time, staying busy. The Meltons were always home while we were cleaning, Bob usually telling us girls some jokes and Kay, his wife, usually yelling at him to do this or that or come here. Becky was always working when we were at her house. Sometimes Nathaniel would be there, but he always got really embarrassed and would hide in his room until we'd have to come in and dust. Donna Summers posters covered his walls and The Rock action



figures littered his bureau. He had cerebral palsy and Rachel used to bite him when they were younger at church.

We cleaned Hayley's grandma's house as well. Her house always seemed spotless to me anyway, but we went over all the usual culprits: toilet, shower, carpet, and then sat and talked on her short-backed cozy couches for a bit. Combine those regular jobs with the random calls here and there from little old ladies at church and other family members running short on time for cleaning and we had ourselves a lucrative industry.

Cleaning was a much better way to make money than some of our other endeavors. One of those endeavors that will always live in the lore of The Odd Jobs Club is painting fences. The first time we painted a fence was at my Aunt Cindy's in Kingston, a long black horse fence that had to be tarred. It was the middle of summer, it was still just Hayley and I between third and fourth grade, and we wanted the job. We put old ratty shorts on with T-shirts, slapped hats on our heads and we were ready. We decided to meet in the middle, Hayley starting out at Snyder Road and I began near the lean-to. It was pretty fun at first, slapping the thick black paint brushes onto the beams, yelling back and forth how far we were.

It soon became apparent that the heat was only going to get worse and the black paint that covered our arms and faces acted as a magnet for the sun. Cindy brought us little white cups of

lemonade; we covered them in the black tar of our fingers. When we met in the middle, we hadn't yelled to each other in at least an hour and our backs and arms were sore. We only finished one side of one length of fence, but we were done.

The photograph of us as the smirking spotted pair standing in front of a tree shows our hats thrown back and a smile of relief on our faces. My uncle Pete used turpentine to get the tar off our skin. We got in the shower and scrubbed each other's faces, uncovering blisters and sunburn wherever the paint had been. But we made a whole \$25.

Our painting experience did not end there. The three of us were hired twice to paint a white picket fence for Gene, the Little Debbie man, from our church. The white paint was much kinder, and we got to play with Baby, the Great Dane, and lay in his hammock when we were finished. One part of me knows that we learned a great deal about hard work paying off and that type of lesson at Cindy's and Gene's, but another part of me questions how much more money we were really worth. We've all been willing to do the dirty work since those jobs, though, whether it's scrubbing a toilet or organizing our annual yard sale. I do know one thing: I'll hire painters if I ever have a horse fence that needs painting at my house.

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Rachel and I have always shared a love for horses, Hayley not so much. But she puts up with us and, next on the agenda of our trip; we went to visit the barn where Rachel gave trail rides. She was in love with a horse named Joshua, whom she'd bought, and couldn't wait to show us where she spent most of her time. After a ten minute drive, we pulled up to a tree-filled farm with fencing made of large branches and an old log cabin on a crest. The place looked dilapidated, with old grills sitting out everywhere, and what looked like an eBay assortment of Pepsi and Coke machines surrounding the barn entrance. The barn itself was open-air with a mud pit out back. I looked over at Rachel.

"This is it?"

"Yeah, isn't it nice?" She smiled and zoomed her car into a side yard. We all got out of the car and stretched our legs.

"It looks kind of run down," Hayley said. She was being honest. The place didn't look healthy. We made our way toward the barn.

"It's just well used," Rachel said. She's *always* defending something. There was a girl inside the barn who greeted Rachel right away. Hayley and I stood back and listened as the girl asked Rachel where she'd been. She pointed out that Rach was supposed to be giving a trail ride in about thirty minutes.

Rachel didn't seem pleased; she had wanted to take just us out. Reluctantly, she turned to us and asked if we could wait while she rounded up some horses for the ride. She was saying sorry with her eyes.

We watched as she went to the middle of the mud pit and caught two horses and brought them in, slipping their halters on and tying them to the post. She caught two more, the second with a little more difficulty.

"This is Joshua," Rachel said, wrapping her arms around his neck and smiling. "He's my baby." She left to catch one more and Hayley and I stroked his muzzle and looked at the bones apparent under his coat. He needed some medical treatment and some more feed, but he was beautiful. A Morgan maybe. Rachel started tacking the horses up as a young couple walked into the barn. They were our ride partners.

We got on the horses and off we went. We learned that the couple had just gotten engaged not long ago. Rachel let them ride on some private trails while we followed at a distance. Hayley's horse was acting up, and Rach thought it was hilarious. The ride was nice, the tree canopy cut the heat and everything was so green. Rachel was good at this. We rode, knee by knee, through the trails not really saying much but I think we were all content. I reached down and patted his neck, smiling, and then kicked him into a canter to follow the girls.

We got back to Rachel's apartment and fell into a much-needed nap. We were so tired, the heat didn't even bother us and we collapsed head to foot on the couch. When we woke up, we started getting ready for the evening. Showers, outfits, perfume, make up.

"Should I wear this dress with the boots or this dress with the heels?" Rachel stood in front of her mirror with about four dresses on hangers and two pairs of boots. I laughed.

"I say the blue one. With the heels," I said. She looked at the blue dress and one of the pairs of boots together. Hayley looked over from her small mirror.

"The pink one would be cute too," she said. Rachel went into the bathroom to change and came out in a dress made of handkerchiefs and a completely different pair of boots. I laughed again. Of course it would be a completely different outfit. Once we were all ready, we got in the car and headed downtown.

"I want to take you guys to Merchant's. I heard it's really classy from some friends who went," Rachel said. We were going 50 down a residential street. I was hanging on.

"That sounds good. I'm starving," Hayley said. We parked on the street a few blocks away from the strip and walked to the restaurant. The sky was peach and purple; downtown was still quiet. The restaurant was an old brick building with ornate

columns and white tablecloths. We were seated upstairs, next to a couple speaking French and two young businessmen. We chatted about the rest of the evening, about Joshua and how we wanted a dog for our apartment. The waiter chat us up, talked with Rachel in depth about the underground alt music scene, and then expressed sorrow for her that we were dragging her to the honky tonks. We smiled and paid and left, gliding my fingers along the white grand piano on the way out. Here we go.

The first bar was mostly empty and we sat and watched a young man, probably even younger than us, twirl a girl around the empty dance floor, two-stepping and clapping on the off beat. I wished I could be her for a second, dancing around that empty bar, knowing the next steps and smiling knowingly at the onlookers. Hayley and Rachel got drinks and I sat clutching my purse.

We went to Coyote Ugly next, complete with the girls dancing on the bar, the bras hanging precariously off every pipe in the joint, and a country rock-n-roll crowd. It seemed empowering in a weird way at first: I was here, I was old enough, and I could do anything I wanted. I could stay out all night, I could dance on bars, and I could even throw my bra up to join the others. But I could tell you, even then, that I wouldn't. I just don't think I have it in me. Hayley bought some drinks for them; we all watched the show. The rest of the

bars were a blur, the same cowboy hats and boots, ear-busting music, and the cool mulch-smell air that greeted us every door we left. I checked my phone at least twenty times for the hour, to the enjoyment of the girls. I just felt like we should be going back to the apartment at some point before the sun started coming up even though it was still early. I was still the one yelling, "C'mon guys," just like Kirkwood and really every other thing we'd done together, and checking the time. They understood, though, and we walked to the car a little after midnight, arm in arm, and walking step for step. We were inseparable again; this night would go on and on.

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Endings seem to come slowly but before you know it, the story has already ended. That last summer of the Odd Jobs Club was like that. Our bank account was cleared out for our last trip, the senior trip, and we had no scheduled jobs on the books. We had no school to come back to after the August heat and our parents were being surprisingly laissez-faire about nights out. Boundaries had been broken.

June began with our graduation; I wasn't as sad as I thought I would be. These people I had known, many since preschool, were scattering as far and wide as the postal service

would carry their college and job applications. Being as wary of change as I am, I thought I would have to brace myself for the crumbling edges. Hayley, Rachel, and I hadn't been able to see each other much, due to the influx of graduation parties, and standing there in our robes and hats was surreal. The photo of the three of us shows big smiles and shiny eyes. White robes and caps and heels, a background of fuzzy faces of friends and parents. We were unraveling from some point in the distant past, carpets being laid out in all directions. Rachel planned to move to Nashville, attend High Tech Institute and learn to massage. I don't know why I was surprised at the time; she'd always said she wanted to leave Ohio and never ever come back. I just never believed her because I thought everyone talked about it, but ended up sticking around. I planned to go to Ohio State and write. Hayley went to Ohio State as well; to become the dental hygienist she'd always wanted to be. We had decided to room together. I think Rachel felt a little left out of our planning for how to decorate the dorm, find our way around Columbus, and talking about our first year of freedom. She started hanging out with a new group of friends that stayed out late, jumped off cliffs into creeks, and watched indie films in dark basements. I started hardening up; I had a feeling that things would be very different. I tried to make myself think of Rachel as someone far away already, so that when she was, it



would be no different. She was just preparing herself as well.

Over the spring, we planned a trip as a last hurrah: our third and last trip as The Odd Jobs Club, for two weeks after we graduated in June. We were going for our second trip to Clearwater, this time by ourselves, while most of our classmates went to Myrtle Beach and Miami. Hayley went to clear out the money in our account, closing it for good. She reported feeling sad about the final trip to the bank and the last entry into the treasury book. I wrote down our trip in the logbook for the last time, taking a second to flip through the pages of jobs we had completed. Rachel looked through the dollar store address book with all the clients we had accrued over the years, remembering some jobs clearly and laughing about forgotten gigs. We packed our bags and flew out early one morning, leaving a rainy and cool Ohio and arriving in sunny hot Florida.

Hayley and Rachel slept on the plane ride home, and I looked over their faces, carefully shut eyes and faint smiles on chapped lips. I felt a sense of attachment and detachment, I knew them so completely: we would always be linked by this huge back-story, but we were also changing and spreading out. I knew, in that moment, though the club had ended, these girls were going to be my best friends for the years to come.

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We had survived the evening out or, more like it, I had survived. I was looking forward to sitting around reminiscing for our last night in Nashville. I drove us home and got in the shower, only to find when I was dressed they had gone out again. They'd left me. I was angry they would leave, not telling me where they were or when they'd be back, I was tired, and at that moment, I just *wished* I were back in Ohio circa 1995. Thinking back, I know that they didn't think about it; they just went. They aren't me. I tried to call and they wouldn't answer. I wandered around Rachel's apartment, looking at everything. For a moment, then, I wished I could be more like them just like that dancing girl, not thinking about all the other things and just going out to have fun. But I just felt so comfortable going into Rachel's massage room, closing the door, and shutting my eyes.

When my alarm went off the next morning so we could get on the road, I got up and made pancakes on that ancient stove. It was quiet; and as I stirred the batter, I thought about the night before. Was there any reason to be angry? Why did I feel *left out* when I don't even like *going out*? Why am I angry at the end of such a good trip? Do they know that I was upset? I got dressed and ready before waking the girls. We ate breakfast

standing around the kitchen; I think they could tell I was a little miffed.

"You know, I don't really like being left alone," I said. Rachel dragged her pancake across the syrupy plate. Hayley went down to the bathroom. "And it probably wasn't the best decision for you guys to go out alone."

"Sorry. I didn't think you'd want to come," Rachel said.

"Well, you could have at least told me," I said. I walked to the sink and through the remainders of my pancakes down the disposal and began packing my car. Rachel didn't say much else. I should probably have just left it alone and enjoyed the last bit of our trip.

We talked about it in the car. Hayley got to meet most of the new friends that Rachel was always telling us about, while I had missed it for a shower and a snooze on that massage table. From her perspective, it had been a long night. I didn't ask any more questions and we talked about other things during the drive home. We've never really discussed it since; I think I feel safer that way but I still wonders what they thought the minute they stepped out the door.

It took me a week to call Rachel and, by that time, she had moved on to the next thing. She was buying a wolf-dog hybrid and I, of course, had some sort of advice to give about that. I'd like to say that we cleared up the entire evening from that

trip; I'd like to say that I called her on the way home and we all apologized and some consensus was met, but none of us have really brought it up and Hayley and I haven't been back down since. I think she knows how I felt, though. But I'm also beginning to see that I can't always have it my way either. I think, more than the last evening, I was upset that Rachel was surviving, thriving in fact, without me. It was Hayley as well; she didn't need me the way I saw myself needing her. They will always be their own people and I still worry that I haven't found that in myself yet.

We've planned another Odd Jobs Club reunion trip to Nashville, three weeks away; this time, I think everything will be different again. And that's OK. We can't stay the same forever, as much as I'd like to; life in general would get boring awful quickly. We'll go down and have fun doing the random things Rach plans and escape Ohio for a bit. We'll just be *together* and, sometimes, that's just as good as coming home.